Spengler's List:
Screenwriting, the Wilderness and the Civilising Death of the Arts

Evan Wm. Cameron

Professor Emeritus
Senior Scholar in Screenwriting

Graduate Programmes,
Film & Video and Philosophy

York University

[Written in January of 1994, the essay was published within the *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society* 24, Number 2 (Summer 1994), pages 174-184. See doi.org/10.1080/10632921.1994.9941766. The format of the version here presented varies slightly from the original.]

Spengler's List:
Screenwriting, the Wilderness and the Civilising Death of the Arts

> The aesthetic contemplation of the beautiful is a liberal education.
>
> Georg F. W. Hegel, 1820-29[1]

> … [Descartes] was determined to learn the truth if he could, or do without it if he couldn't, but to make no compromise. The preface and the road to truth was the courage and determination to doubt everything that could be doubted.
>
> This is a dangerous proposal – if its danger can be measured by the amount of terror it inspires. I doubt if any board of trustees would be comfortable if the philosophy department of its particular institution were to announce today that skepticism would hereafter be more heavily stressed. But before we all join heads in the sand, let us remind ourselves that political fanaticism, narrow nationalism, class conflict, and racial hatred arise not from an excess of skepticism but from an excess of faith.
>
> Nelson Goodman, 1946[2]

I wish within this essay to articulate a sentiment rarely acknowledged by filmmakers or teachers of it, however commonly we entertain it in the wee hours of wintry mornings. It is a sentiment about the world and our place in it, a conjecture whose time, I fear, has come at last.

---

[1] From page 158 of the first of the four volumes of Volume I Hegel's *Philosophy of Fine Arts* as translated by F. P. B. Osmaston (London: 1920), a transcription of Hegel's manuscript notes for lectures given at the University of Berlin in 1820, with revisions in 1823, 1826 and 1829, and first published after Hegel's death in 1835. For a succinct summary of the context of Hegel's suggestion, see Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: a Short History* (New York, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966), pages 234-241..

[2] Nelson Goodman, from "Descartes as Philosopher", a talk delivered to the Cartesian Research Bureau, Boston, 31 March 1946 (reprinted in *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), page. 46.).

Polar Bears and Mockingbirds

Sometime ago I experienced with weeks of each other a coupling of events that has since caused me to rethink many things.

The first occurred after watching a televised documentary, scanning a newspaper and reading a book. The documentary showed the extinction of an entire herd of African elephants by poachers using assault rifles – the kind of rifles that residents of Los Angeles were rushing to buy that same evening, fearing that the weapons would be declared illegal following a gunning-down of grade-school children by a Rambo clone. The news report reviewed a conference in the far north of scientists alarmed by the newly-discovered incidence of pollution at the termini of the arctic food chains. The book was by John Livingston, a colleague of mine at York University and one of Canada's distinguished naturalists.[3]

Livingston had asked a key question:

> Why have the arguments of conservationists for the protection of wildlife not been respected? Why, indeed, have they not even been understood?

His answer was simple:

> Because civilized human beings are homocentric. Wildlife, to remain wild, cannot be used (that is, preserved, regulated or conserved) but must rather be *left alone*. Human beings, however, being civilized, will leave nothing alone. Hence the animals will disappear.

Only after the three encounters did it register upon me, as if I had been branded by a hot iron, that I was likely, very soon, to bear witness to the extinction of several of the largest land mammals ever to grace this earth: the polar bear through pollution of its food, the grizzly through encroachment on its breeding grounds, and the African elephant through slaughter by other animals armed with assault rifles capable of extinguishing whole herds at a time.

My second experience was equally unnerving. Having taught filmmaking for over twenty-five years, I have seen more than my fair share of movies – the good, the bad and the

---

[3] John Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 1988).

ugly. I have lived in archives, sought out lost prints and been privileged to experience many remarkable films which, alas, my students will never encounter. Nevertheless, there are gaps in my acquaintance with the films of the past. I have never seen some films that I ought to have seen.

On a Friday afternoon I happened to notice atop a cabinet in the office a videotape of Fellini's LA STRADA (1955) on its way to the archive. I, of course, grew up with Fellini's films; indeed, as an undergraduate, his 8½ (1963) had spun me around. But, and I'm embarrassed to say it, I had never seen LA STRADA. So, being chair of the department at the time, I commandeered the tape, took it home and watched it with my family. Soon thereafter my daughter asked me to retrieve from the local video store a tape of TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD (1962). She had read the novel and been asked to see the film as part of a school assignment. Again, I had never seen the movie, so we viewed it together as a family.

The films, of course, were extraordinary, due in part to having been written by two of the finest screenwriters ever to draw breath – Fellini and Horton Foote. I was prepared for their excellence. I was unprepared, however, for my response to them, for even today, in memory, I am suffused with a deep and abiding sadness – a sense of irreversible loss. For neither of those films could have been conceived today by any screenwriter known to me; and if conceived, neither of them would have been made; and if made, neither of them would have secured distribution; and if distributed, neither of them would have made the slightest impact whatsoever, for few if any human beings would ever have seen them.

Why are the bears and the elephants, the rhinos and the whales, disappearing from my world? Why are films like LA STRADA and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD no longer being made? Suddenly, as through a mist lifting to disclose a perspective long forgotten, I was reminded of what Spengler had implied so long ago, namely that the answer to both questions is the same. It is so obviously the answer to both questions that, like most important answers in the world, we cannot help but overlook it, for we have been well trained to do so.

How Films Were Once Designed

Recall with me how films were conceived, produced and encountered in the 1930s, 1940s or at any time up through the 1960s. Then, as now, filmmaking was big business. People made money from the making and distributing of films, some of them a lot of it. The industry, then as now, was managed by greedy people for the benefit of other greedy

people, and few of them, then as now, cared if others were trampled in the march toward profits.

Nevertheless, the making and marketing of films were once constrained by a factor distinguishable only in hindsight and after extinction.

> Films, once upon a time, were tools for the creation of experiences sold to viewers.

Whatever the intent of the marketeers, films were once, for the viewer, extraordinary events to be encountered only with effort and only after detaching oneself momentarily from one's encompassing informational environment. To encounter a film, I, like my grandparents before me, had to choose to perform a *selective public social act* in preference to others (as various church fathers recurringly complained when warning their flocks against the temptation). To encounter a film one had to leave one's home, collect one's friends, walk or drive to the cinema, purchase a ticket, buy the popcorn, find one's seat, attend to the movie and thereafter share in the general conversation about the experience all had purchased and shared.

Although seeing a movie was unlike reading a book in important ways, both shared a crucial feature: a book and a movie were once, economically speaking, means to whatever ends their readers and viewers brought to them. Readers and viewers remained, in Kant's phrase, ends in themselves.[4] The product being sold was a book or a movie, *not* the reader or the viewer, and the profits of the industries that produced them were derived, however indirectly, from their sale.

Kant went on to observe that one ought never to treat human beings as means, only as ends; this was a necessary condition for an act to be ethical. Books and movies were once designed to be the ends of an economic chain and hence a means toward whatever ends the purchaser put them. They were a means by which you and I, as purchasers, could achieve our ends, however imbecilic or lethal those might be. With respect to the business of designing and producing books or movies, therefore, we remained ends, not means. Thousands of human beings worked to make books and movies for us, and thereby lived lives of purpose, value and meaning for which no ethical excuses had to be made.

---

[4] See the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative. (Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Lewis While Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1959 [1785]), pages 46ff).

Some readers of good books remain to this day ends, not means. Not so, however, for viewers of movies, and thereon hangs a tale.

How Films Are Now Designed

Nearly forty years ago films began to be shown on television. With the advent of videotaping, films began to be *made* to be shown on television. Within the past decade all films have been made to be released on television and to serve the goals of those marketing the products manufactured for sale by means of television.

Arcana aside, what distinguishes the business of television from the once dominant, but now extinct, business of producing films for exclusive distribution in theatres? Televisers are not in the business of selling programmes to viewers; rather

> Television programmes are tools for selling viewers to advertisers.

Television, unlike the movies, makes its money not from the purchase of programmes by viewers, but from *the purchase of viewers by advertisers* who, in turn, make their money from the subsequent purchase by viewers of cars, beer, soft-drinks, houses, insurance, breakfast cereals, television sets, etc..

When encountering events by means of television (whether sitcoms, opera, sports, news or science features), one may mistakenly believe that one is selecting programmes of one's choice. The truth, of course, is that whichever programmes one chooses to view, one has been pre-sold to high bidders who, in return for their investment, have secured the right to entice you as unselectively as possible to purchase whatever products they market. Programmes are simply the fillers sandwiched between commercials.

Consequently, all programmes made for television, and therewith almost every film now being made, are designed to garner the largest possible audience (an audience, at last count, of at least 15-20,000,000 viewers); and, as Joshua Meyrowitz notes,[5],

> A basic rule of network programming is "Least Objectionable Programming" (LOP). That is, the key is to design a program that is least likely to be turned *off*, rather than a program viewers will actively seek out. After all, any program that will delight one segment of the population (opera, advanced auto mechanics, hard core pornography, Shakespeare, introduction to quantum physics, etc.) is

[5] Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pages 73 and 74.

> likely to turn off – and be turned off by – most of the rest of the population most of the time. And if the cost of producing and distributing the program and commercials exceeds what advertisers are willing to pay to reach the number of viewers the program draws (or if another program at the same cost can draw more viewers), then the program will almost certainly go off the air. Most television programmers, therefore, consciously try to design programs that will reach as large an audience as possible.

The impact of marketing upon film design, however, reaches far beyond generalities of plot and character. Each event to be encountered by means of a film, regardless of narrative function, is increasingly being subjected to constraints imposed by the manufacturers of the *products* seen within it. Screenwriters are now routinely required to redesign scenes to accentuate the soft-drinks being imbibed, the fast-foods being gobbled, the clothing being worn, the automobile being driven and, always, the music being heard.

What Caused the Change?

What enabled the marketeers of television to encompass and redraw the economics of film? Primarily the postwar revolution in computerized communication. The multinational corporations which, governmentally abetted, now dominate the "cultural industries" of the west, and increasingly the east, can now flood the environment with such massive quantities of focused information that control of the scattered remainder, once a primary goal of the powerful, becomes unnecessary.

The tactics of controlling people have shifted. The powerful, if wise, no longer seek to restrict the production of information and access to it by individuals, but rather to *encompass* it within a mushroom cloud of competing information that obliterates distinctions and defocuses opposition. The powerful, if wise, no longer burn books or movies, or curtail speech or prohibit artists from exhibiting their works. Rather, they engulf them in a proliferation of books, movies, speeches and paintings that render individual voices part of the economic chorus.

Not long ago, if one tried to speak, write or sing against the dominant powers of the western world, one was denied access to media of dissemination. Now, if only one shouts loudly enough, one will be invited to appear on the late-night talk shows, joining others well-paid to amuse the crowds. To speak, write or sing today is to join the economic chorus, and if one shuts one's mouth instead, no one notices.

The Global Consequences

In 1962 Marshall McLuhan convinced many that they were living within a "global village" electronically integrated.[6] McLuhan was half-right: we share increasingly a common experience of the world mediated by our electronic technologies, and our conceptions of the world, derived from our perceptions thus mediated, are radically unlike those we should otherwise have had of it.

The world within which we live, however, is hardly akin to the perceptual or conceptual environment of a "village", for villages have boundaries beyond which lies the *wilderness* – the refuge of the untamed and unmanageable, the uncivilized and undeveloped – that, being unlike us, can serve as a measure of who and what we are. Our world, however, as Livingston insisted, has no room for the wilderness, for the electronically integrated forces of urbanization find it unprofitable.[7]

We are experiencing, for the first time in human history, the abolition of terrestrial frontiers and the subjecting of the whole earth to urban blight. Soon nothing will be left untouched, unregulated, unsupervised or unchecked; nothing will be left alone. We shall continue, with fervour, to fly cruise missiles over grizzly breeding grounds, dump oil into Prince William's inlet, burn rain forests to make Big Macs and abolish whatever vestigial natural structures we find blocking the way – among them seemingly useless organisms, human or otherwise. The most complex aspects of the wild and its life will disappear, and with it the last perceptual reinforcements we shall ever have had of "village" life.

Contra McLuhan, therefore, we are living within an all-encompassing urban *civilization*, an unbounded global *city* rather than a village. We are coming to live exactly as Spengler, the most perspicacious observer of the historical trajectories of this century, said we would.

Spengler's List

In 1914, as the first world war broke upon Europe, Oswald Spengler, a German student of history, philosophy and mathematics with an impetuous yet resonant literary style, completed the first volume of his *Decline of the West*, a work that, following its publication in 1918, was to influence profoundly the *weltanschauung* of almost every

---

[6] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1980 [1962]), pages 31ff.

[7] See page 2 above.

literate thinker of the 20th century, whether or not they acknowledged it.[8] Among those admittedly influenced by the book were thinkers as diverse as Ortega, Fitzgerald, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Frye and Henry Kissinger.

Spengler wrote neither history nor philosophy but rather used both to illustrate a prophetic thesis, namely that the culture of western Europe and America, once vibrant and innovative, had declined into a rigidified civilization dominated by the narrow, technical interests of the masses of human beings swelling its dominant *world-cities*.

We human beings, Spengler observed, are but parts of the larger social organisms, the nation-states, within which we live, and these, in turn, are but parts of the encompassing European-American civilization that itself functions as an organism. Organisms, however, must live and die, and so, Spengler suggested, must every civilization, including our own. The trajectory of their lives is a mappable passage: they begin as young and vibrant cultures fed from a wide diversity of scattered human communities in touch with the nonhuman aspects of the world and sharing a common world-view; they mature into fecund cultures producing an astonishing range of artistic, literary, and economic products suffused by a unique imagery and symbolic content visible only in hindsight; they rigidify into civilizations under the impetus of urbanization and its concomitant specialization; and then, having lost their generative capacities, they wither away, collapse from external pressures or persist, perhaps for centuries, in a fossilized echo of the culture that gave them birth.

Spengler drew a conclusion from this conjecture of overwhelming importance. No *art* could survive the universalizing constraints of urbanized civilisation.

> The arts of human kind, liberal or otherwise, were facing extinction.

Art, Spengler concluded, could only flourish during the unurbanized (that is, uncivilized) stages in the life of a culture. Once a culture had consolidated its energies into institutions deriving their sustenance from the specialized structures of urbanized life, genuine art would no longer be possible. Within a civilization many people might continue to produce paintings, music, poetry, plays, etc., and occasionally a work of artistic merit might arise as a simple statistical accident of their proliferation. As a rule, however, the events produced would serve only as decorative appendages to the social, political and economic forces of the dominant institutions.

---

[8] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, authorized translation with notes by Charles Francis Atkinson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971 [1918, 1922]).

Within a civilization, therefore, "art works" might be contrived to divert, amuse, entertain or instruct, but they would no longer *enlighten*, for within the corridors of civilized power, utility, not enlightenment, is the measure of value. "Artists", severed from intimate contact with the nonhuman aspects of their world (things, that is, neither made nor conceived by humans), would no longer be capable, however hard they might try, of drawing us through their works to those humbling encounters with *other things* that alone could transfigure our understanding of being human.

Spengler insisted that he was being neither optimistic nor pessimistic: he was simply focusing our attention upon the advent of the final episode in the life of our culture – an era that would take its own unique form but had been mirrored in other cultures in the past as they, in their turn, became civilized. Some of us might find it appalling, but only momentarily, for we would soon die out, and only those attuned to the changed world would remain. Art, culturally rooted, would no longer thereafter be creatable, not because it would be prohibited, but because no creative young man or women would want to do it. It would be a waste of their time, and of the time of their civilized colleagues, for it would be at best a serious but momentary diversion from the technical aspirations toward which all innovative and useful efforts were directed. Our most sensitive and creative young people would train themselves to become lawyers, business men, accountants, bankers, scientists, politicians or economists – or corporate sculptors, architects, rock musicians, competitive pianists, prosaic decorators of the mind of all sorts or even filmmakers. But not artists.

The Liberal Arts

Spengler drew another conclusion as well: if art should be impossible within the urbanized civilization, then the *liberal arts* would be equally so. Urban people would talk and write incessantly, but, except for the oddly maladjusted, neither of history nor philosophy. Urbanized humans, finding no use for either, would live by myths instead, pervasive and imaginary figments which, however clever in their mimicry, would remain irrevocably severed from the historical, philosophical and hence natural roots that once sustained them.

> "Philosophy" would no longer begin in *wonder* at the oddity of our presence among the nonhuman things of the world (as Plato and Aristotle, or William James or Wittgenstein had insisted), but would rather become simply a sustaining aspect of the (Derridean) chatter between well-fed and well-read urban intellectuals, the discourse of deconstruction.

> "History" as well would disappear, for as we run faster and faster to avoid focusing upon the meaninglessness of our own lives, shoveling whatever we can into our own subjectivity, the lives and concerns of those who lived before us would cease to be of interest except to connoisseurs. And therewith would vanish the roots of "the liberal arts" that once nourished and sustained our institutions of higher learning, our colleges and universities predominant among them.

In the 12th century A.D. the first universities consolidated themselves in Italy, France and England. They arose in response to an influx of new ideas, derived from newly-rediscovered classical texts, that challenged the hegemony of the root institutions of the medieval period. The *liberal arts* about which they were formed encompassed those disciplines, historically and philosophically centred, which, in the words of the Oxford English Dictionary, were

> ... open-minded, candid ... Free from bigotry or unreasonable prejudice in favour of traditional opinions or established institutions; open to the reception of new ideas or proposals of reform.

When Spengler suggested that history and philosophy could not survive within mature civilizations, he was simply indicating a consequence of their structure. Civilizations rest upon social, political and economic institutions whose function, in part, is to immunize them from criticism. Effective criticism of a civilization, therefore, can only come from *without*, and hence there can be no liberal arts *within*.

Spengler also insisted, however, that no effective criticism could come from *without* a civilization, either, for those outside were bound to speak a different language, to misunderstand and hence to miss the point. However suspect this premise may be with respect to other civilizations, Spengler's conclusion seems unavoidable with respect to our own; for if, as he and McLuhan have suggested, we are living within the first all-encompassing, *global* civilization to appear on this earth, then there will soon be no other place, no wilderness, within which to stand!

A university was once *a place apart*, a wilderness populated by poor scholars rejecting the economic enticements of the day to preserve their freedom to think and criticize. Within the global city, however, our universities have themselves become big businesses – among them the largest extant. They not only serve in part the prevailing institutional aims of our civilization; they are increasingly its *avant garde*. They are busy redefining what "unreasonable prejudice in favour of traditional opinions or established institutions" means, and very shortly no act that generates communities of buyers, or helps to sell them to advertisers, will seem "unreasonable", whether within the academic world or

without. With no frontier, there will be no wilderness, intellectual or otherwise, and hence no place external to the established institutions of our civilization from which critical missiles could be launched against it. Disposable students will learn disposable skills from disposable faculty within a wasteland of transitory pretention.

Spengler was right in spades: within our global civilization, the extinction of the arts, liberal or otherwise, seems assured.

The Teaching of Filmmaking

Having taught screenwriting and film design for over twenty-five years, and having taught it successfully, I have no doubt that it can be taught and taught well. I have no doubt, either, that it will be taught, and taught "ethically", within our world-cities. Within the world-city, after all, ethical measures will conform to whatever institutional measures of value prevail. Since organisms will come to be valued only in so far as they appear to be able to *buy* things, filmmaking will become a paradigm of ethical activity: the goal of designing movies will become exclusively the creation of events useful for selling human beings to advertisers (or some future enhancement of the process), and hence the strategies of entertainment will conform exactly to the ethical norms of the civilization within which we shall find ourselves.

Note, however, that filmmaking within the world-city will never again function as an *art*, much less a companion to the *liberal arts*, in the sense in which those words were once understood by every cultured human being in the west, and in which they continue to be understood by those of us whose vestigial memories were mistrained in an earlier era. But those words will surely not long retain for others the implications they now have for me. We are witnessing the encompassing realisation of the world-city through television's power to create and sustain an environment of mass information, and through the computer's power to shift through it for those more-or-less in control.

Concurrently, and consequently, we are witnessing the institutionalization of art: the art we knew has been rendered impotent, and the new "art" is not only encompassing but buttressed by its own self-justifying theory (the "institutional theory of art" of George Dickie, and others, wherein art is whatever *Art Forum* says it is, or thereabouts.[9] For we are witnessing the global extension of those (and only those) institutions designed to create, protect and sustain communities of *buyers*. One's value as an organism is coming

[9] George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: an Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1974).

to be measured in direct proportion to one's ability to be able to buy. If you are unable to buy, you will have no value and will neither be protected nor long remembered.

From which it follows, with appalling necessity, that the wildlife will disappear. A grizzly cannot buy anything and cannot be trained to buy anything. Within the new world, therefore, it will have no intrinsic value. The grizzlies will survive only to the extent that they do not get in the way – only, that is, if they can serve within the world-city as diversion, entertainment or intellectual amusement for those who will not let them *be*. (A conservationist, as everyone knows, is one who wants everyone *else* to leave the bears alone!) And so the grizzlies will disappear, along with the rhinos and the elephants, and I shall bear witness to their extinction by means of television, sandwiched between the Prime Minister's latest "photo opportunity" and the weekly "Arts Report".

Conclusion

Soon after 1933, sensitive and humane artists in Germany knew they could no longer contribute ethically to the arts of their country, liberal or otherwise. The lucky emigrated; most made excuses and continued to work as usual (the same excuses one hears today from filmmakers and university professors); a few backed-out; a very few resisted in whatever ways they could, and some even lived to tell about it.

We are lucky. We don't live under the Nazi terror. Books are seldom burned, much-less their authors (when Ruhollah [Ayatollah] Khomeini imposed a *fatwa* on Salmon Rushdie, he seemed singularly out of touch: how could one care that much about a *book*?); paintings are seldom torched or painters persecuted; films are seldom banned or screenwriters blacklisted. As the Virginia Slim's ads used to say, 'We've come a long way, baby'. For we have learned to *engulf* rather than prohibit. We have learned to encourage people to express themselves freely rather than to constrain themselves within a discipline or tradition, and then to surround their work with the similar works of so many others that all value evanesces in the buzzing, blooming confusion. We live comfortably, creatively and ethically within the Tower of Babel, as Huxley said we would, for babel is good for business.[10]

We who are filmmakers, or teachers of it, will have a distinguished rôle to play within the world-city. To do so, however, we must, as Spengler insisted, *understand* and *acquiesce*. How so? A single example must here suffice.

---

[10] See, for example, Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965 [1932, 1958]).

During the early 1960s, Frank Daniel, the screenwriter, was the doyen of those at the forefront of the brief but brilliant Czech new-wave, inspiring many young filmmakers to their finest achievements. Twenty-five years later, however, Daniel had come to *understand* and *acquiesce!* Having been converted under the California sunshine into the Dean of the film school at USC, the paradigm training centre for filmmakers in our world-city, Daniel stood in 1989 before an international congress of film teachers in Los Angeles, many of them from poor countries in the Third World struggling to make films of any kind in the face of the American cinematical juggernaut, and, without guile, greeted them with the words

"Welcome to the entertainment capitol of the world."

Frank Daniel, a humane, sensitive and courteous host, had come to understand exactly the proper place of filmmakers within the world-city in which he now lived and moved and had his being – the world-city of Spengler in which the once and wondrous art of filmmaking, and every other art besides, can serve only to further the task, as Neil Postman put it, of "amusing ourselves to death".[11]

[11] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, New York: Viking Penguin Incorporate., 1985).